Resources and Commitment as Critical Factors in the Development of ‘Gifted’ Athletes

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Several sport-specific talent detection models have been developed over the last 30 years (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). However, these models have failed in at least one important standard of judgment—accurately predicting who will develop into an elite level athlete. We believe that the WICS model presented by Sternberg also fails to meet this challenge. We agree that the concepts presented in the WICS model are important factors in explaining giftedness across a wide range of domains, however, evaluating a person’s wisdom, intelligence, and creativity as the sole indicators of ‘giftedness’ is problematic because this approach does not consider two more significant factors in attaining high achievement, access to essential resources and commitment.

If wisdom, intelligence, and creativity are truly developing expertise, then the model, in its current form, does not have any mechanism for identifying those individuals who have the same (or greater) potential as others but have not had the same exposure to the resources essential for optimal development. Studies that have documented the relative age effect in sport (see Musch & Grondin, 2001, for a review) support the notion that access to essential resources is one of the most important factors in determining expertise. Generally, players that are born in the first half of the year are overly represented at the elite level in sports such as ice hockey, soccer, and baseball. An explanation for this phenomenon is that coaches at a very young age choose players based on their physical stature. Bigger and more physically mature players then receive more opportunities to practice, more encouragement, feedback, and support from their coaches, and a greater likelihood of developing into elite performers. Through the WICS lens these players would have more wisdom, intelligence, and creativity but these characteristics would be a consequence of their exposure to a superior developmental environment, not an antecedent.

Sternberg also states that commitment (i.e. motivation) is an important attribute of the WICS, however, we argue that it may be the most important attribute for the acquisition of expertise in sport (and arguably other domains). The most consistent variable distinguishing those who achieve the highest levels of success in sports and their less successful counterparts is hours of training (e.g. Baker, Côté & Abernethy,
Clearly, the key to amassing the quantity of training required for developing expert-level skills is sustaining commitment across years of involvement in a domain. Regardless of the level of wisdom, intelligence and/or creativity a person has, if they are not properly committed to perform the thousands of hours of training required to refine their skills, they will not achieve ‘greatness’. Perhaps in addition to measures of wisdom, creativity, and intelligence, a measure of ‘commitment’ or ‘work ethic’ should be considered by programmes seeking to identify the gifted. Given these issues, further development is required before the WICS model can be seen as a model of giftedness that can be applied to sport.

References

